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Community Online

Daithí Mac Síthigh

Lecturer, Norwich Law School, University of East Anglia

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The 'Digital Britain' report of 2009 deals with a range of information and communications issues, and will undoubtedly be of interest to those involved local and regional government for some time to come. At the heart of the report is the idea of a universal service commitment for broadband Internet access, eliminating the infamous 'not-spots' where residents cannot enjoy the benefits of Digital Britain or are limited in their ability to do so. The question of 'broadband for all' has already been considered in these pages ('Full speed ahead', Public Sector Review: LGR issue 14) and remains a compelling topic within 21st century public policy debates. Unsurprisingly, there is also great public interest in the advantages that access to the Internet can bring, particularly for communities and regions that have been poorly served to date. Residents of prosperous urban areas may have a choice of providers, while others may find themselves dealing with a single provider, or with a service that is little more than a tweaking of 'narrowband' dial-up access that will prove to be inadequate in the face of the demands of modern, media-rich Internet services such as video-on-demand, two-way conferencing, and the range of e-learning services that are becoming widely available.

There is also a close relationship between the policy discourse on Internet connectivity and the separate 'e-government' debate (on the latter, see 'Access all areas', LGR issue 13 on the development of a portfolio of online services in Wakefield). If services are to be delivered through websites, and if citizens are to be encouraged to see online delivery as a reasonable and workable alternative to physical visits to council chambers and posted application forms, then the quality and reliability of Internet access is at the heart of this project. Beyond government, too, the ability of the individual or of community groups to publish and distribute content, particularly where such includes audio or video material depends on factors including the form of access that is available. Better broadband means that the citizen has more opportunities to be a 'writer' of the Internet as well as a 'reader', and the trend in Web services is firmly towards the truly 'read-write' web, one of the initial goals of the WWW which has yet to be realised. But how is this to be realised?

In recent years, a fascinating mixture of scepticism and excitement regarding the idea of wireless Internet access has been apparent. Local government plays a particular role here, and indeed the popular term for such in the United States is 'municipal wifi'. Its particular attractiveness is surely how it

combines ideas of technology, localism and a 'right of access' to cultural, social and economic services. On the other hand, the very question of public provision is controversial; Internet access is a significant and sometimes competitive market in its own right, engaging restrictions on State aid under UK and European Union law. As wireless Internet access can play a role in the formation of new public spaces, though, it remains important to address these challenges. Community-based 'sharing' projects are also of quite some interest.

The development of modern telecommunications networks across Europe is said to vindicate the decisions in the last decade of the 20th century to provide for the progressive liberalisation of formerly State-controlled telecommunications services and markets. Across the EU, most member states can point to the range of private providers continuing to invest in networks and services. The European Commission has been called on to make a series of decisions in relation to State aid and broadband services, with the first being in relation to a project in Cumbria and just under 30% of all decisions made so far relating to UK projects, including a number of projects of great importance in the nations and regions. In most cases, the projects have been approved and relate to tendering rather than direct provision, particularly in rural areas. UK local authorities have also promoted various pilot projects, with the very successful free OpenLink wireless scheme in Norfolk involving local authorities and the East of England Development Authority; it is currently suspending pending a resolution on the next steps, which are likely to involve private provision without further State support.

In 2007, the Commission made an important decision regarding a proposed wireless Internet access project in Prague in the Czech Republic. It received 'conditional approval', though this apparently bland phrase masks a more difficult debate. Conditions were imposed which meant that rather than being an Internet access service, the local authority could only provide services to public servants in the performance of their duties or to the general public in respect of using government-run websites and not the general Internet. Of course, the Internet is difficult to divide into 'government websites' and 'other websites', particularly as services like YouTube and Facebook continue to attract public providers seeking to communicate with audiences, particularly young people, through a range of platforms. Ironically, the user of municipal wifi under the Prague compromise is free to read the press release of a Minister, but not to write a blog entry criticising it or watch a video clip posted by an opposition party. In any event, the Commission recently completed an extensive consultation exercise on the application of state aid rules to broadband projects, which sets out clear criteria by which future projects will be assessed. This is important, as other cities such as Dublin in Ireland scaled back their efforts in the months after the Prague decision, concerned at the risk of an adverse determination.

An alternative approach is that of 'sharing' Internet connections, where a physical connection is extended through wifi routers. This is most dramatically illustrated by the 'One Laptop Per Child' project, where each laptop, distributed in developing countries, is designed to act as a 'repeater' for signals, extending a single connection over a wide area. In the UK, many broadband providers supply equipment to customers that are expected to be used in a domestic context (a wireless router so that all laptops in a house can share a single broadband connection), and there is quite some legal doubt over the question of sharing more generally. There are a number of recorded convictions under communications and computer misuse legislation for access to 'open' routers (where no password or security is in place), and some Internet service providers forbid open sharing, even if the user wishes to do so. On the other hand, a number of projects are up and running, such as FON, where members can, in exchange for sharing their own connection, use the wireless facilities of other FON members when within range. The importance of wireless access is highlighted by the launch of 'smartphones' and other portable devices which can use wifi connections with ease, as their owners move from place to place.

Local, regional and devolved administrations have an important role to play in the broadband debate. Just as they have played a role in the development of libraries and cultural services, for example, the idea that access to information and facilitating service delivery, interaction and communications is at the heart of the mission of such authorities to meet the changing needs of communities across the country. Although the headline-grabbing 'broadband tax' mooted in Digital Britain appears to have been set aside, the implementation of universal access, and preparing for next generation access and increased wireless connectivity, will certainly benefit from the participation of a wide range of stakeholders and public representatives.